

2. Compassion as De-framing

By Lydia Monds

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Knowledge is Power. This famous saying first attributed to Sir Francis Bacon has been unpacked and analyzed from a multitude of perspectives over the centuries. Knowledge provides confidence and security and its pursuit is certainly applauded as a desirable trait.

However, there is a flipside to this that can create a false encounter that prevents truth from surfacing, because our collected learning becomes our reality of someone instead of that someone being allowed to present themselves without our preconceived ideas or notions of them. Our knowledge has replaced the reality in front of us and speaks for them instead of allowing them to speak for themselves. With whom we feel connected, and for whom we feel empathy is *not* the other but our controlled pre-labelling of them. In order to practice genuine compassion, the challenge is to relinquish that control – a purposeful self-emptying – not least so that we can tap into God's infinite reservoir of compassion so eloquently spoken about in last week's reflection.

From genuine connection flows genuine compassion.

Our stance becomes one that dies to the presuppositions that kept us safe and powerful in the knowledge of others and instead leaves us vulnerable to being transformed by the truth that meets us. Particularly when the encounter is with a person or group perceived as marginalized or impoverished our preconception is that we have the opportunity and the obligation to transform them, to better them, to fix them, even to save them. In those moments the truth *of* them retreats and they remain completely unknown to us. When we respond according to achieving our own goals, even the goals of our good intentions, then the other becomes not a recipient but a means to our end.

And yet, if we respond to the Holy Spirit's call to self-empty, we become aware of the Divine Presence in the encounter 'spinning the web of attention between the two who are facing each other' (John V Taylor). The response that the Holy Spirit commands is one that moves away from pre-judgment, fear and a desire to control. It envelops these by de-framing the self, by removing the power and by de-framing those who face us by allowing them to break free from the boundaries and minimizing labels that we have imposed on them.

The beauty of the other exists beyond the self. It is awesome beyond the capacity of the self to be awestruck by it and it is independent of any reaction the self may have to it or any relationship the self may form with it.

There are many 'others' in our lives. Even those close to us, bound to us in intimate relationships – our partners, children, parents – can benefit from our de-framing of them in order that our almost intuitive and automatic knowing of them does not replace the truth of them. As we spin the thread of our connected lives further out into the world, the other becomes our neighbours, our colleagues, the sick, the elderly, those living with disabilities, the Travelling community, the International community, the poor both locally and globally. Immediately, even these few examples spark emotions linked to stereotypes of those who have been named. At once, we feel a certain way towards an entire group of people and that framing of them either creates a type of compassion based on our presumptions, or it ignites revulsion that quashes all potential for encounter or for compassion.

How do we overcome this? We must again return to the Divine Presence in the midst igniting the possibility for genuine encounter, calling us to move beyond the boundaries of our narrow definitions and diminishing preconceptions to a place of seeing with 'fresh eyes'. As we allow the frames we have mounted to be taken down, then we realise we never quite beheld the picture we insisted it contained.

The Lent, take time to think of your opinion of two groups of people: 1 group you know well and the other that you only know about.

- How could the awareness that your knowledge of these groups is not them affect how you think about/relate to them?
- How could your attention to the Holy Spirit ignite your encounter with these groups?
- How could a shift in perception from seeking to transform others to allowing them to transform you alter how you engage with these groups in the future?